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ABSTRACT

In 1970, many Americans are examining anew the costs of achieving efficiency in agriculture through bigness. The exodus of small farmers continues--more than 2.7 million farmers have abandoned farming or sold out to bigger competitors since 1950--while Government agricultural policy remains attuned to the interests of large farmers. All small farmers have suffered from Government policy, but black farmers have been the chief victims. Agriculture is still one of the nation's largest employers, and farm work remains one of the most hazardous occupations. One-fourth of farm-wage workers are under 16 years of age; most children of farm workers suffer serious educational disadvantages; poor health, squalid housing, and powerlessness continue to be the lot of migrant workers; Federal Programs for migrants lack adequate funding and are often administered by state and local bodies unresponsive to migrant needs; and Congress has refused again to include farm workers in unemployment compensation coverage. One improvement, however, is the 1970 Housing Act which provides an increase in the maximum grant for construction of farm labor housing. Nontheless, progress in farm labor conditions has come primarily from the efforts of the poor themselves in organizing small farm cooperatives, self-help projects, and unions. A related document is ED 010 970. (JH)

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THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS AND SMALL FARMERS IN 1970

REPORT TO THE NATIONAL BOARD OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND

by James M. Pierce, Executive Director

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THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS AND SMALL FARMERS IN 1970

REPORT TO THE NATIONAL BOARD OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND

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"A method of funding priorities that provides a sprinkler system for a Mississippi golf course and denies a community the opportunity to give its babies clean water–or protect them from burning to death– is criminal."

Andrew B. James, Director,
Tufts-Delta Health Center,
Mound Bayou, Mississippi

"We have our committees, and we have our meetings, and we have our hearings, and sometimes we even pass legislation. But somehow it does not seem to get down to the folks and make any difference in their lives, because they are not in a position to demand that programs we dream up in Washington are properly responsive to their needs."

Senator Walter F. Mondale, Chairman,
Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor,
April 15, 1970

The Year In Brief

1970 was the year in which many Americans examined anew the costs of achieving efficiency in agriculture through bigness. In the name of "the most efficient agriculture in the world," federal policy for thirty years had abetted through sumptuous subsidies the growth of bigger and richer farms. Millions of small operators had been driven off the land, as much the victims of government policy as of competition. With little education or hope, they had crowded into the great urban centers, adding to the crisis of poverty and racism, social tension and violence, pollution and deteriorating services. Now, Americans learned that the race towards bigness was also depleting and polluting the soil, water, atmosphere, and food through excessive use of hazardous pesticides and fertilizers.

Survival demanded both an ecologically balanced system of production and the revitalization of rural life, but neither was on the government's agenda. The rural poor continued to suffer from the meagerest diets, the lowest incomes, the worst unemployment, the most dilapidated housing, the least adequate medical care, and the most blatant racial discrimination. Almost every government attempt to help had been transmuted into a device either to make the rich richer and the poor poorer or to regulate and pacify the poor with token assistance.

Progress came primarily from the efforts of the poor themselves in organizing small farm cooperatives, self-help projects, and unions. NSF's experience in the field gives ample evidence that rural people want to stay where they have roots and that, if given the chance to live with dignity, will work hard to succeed. The victory won this year by California's grape pickers in the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee raised the hopes of many struggling to overcome rural poverty and deprivation. These gains represented significant steps toward a livable environment for all.

Is the Small Farmer Obsolete?

The exodus of small farmers continues, while government agricultural policy remains attuned to the interests of large farmers. More than 2.7 million farmers, nearly all of them small operators, have abandoned farming or sold out to bigger competitors since 1950. Only about 2 million small farms are left now. Between 1950 and 1970, the total number of farm residents has declined from 23 million to 9.7 million people.

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) keeps growing bigger as farm population dwindles. Between 1950 and 1970, USDA appropriations rose from $2.3 billion to $7.5 billion and its staff grew from 84,000 to 125,000. Most of USDA's money and time are devoted to expanding and improving the operations of the one million farmers with gross sales of $10,000 or more whom its officials consider serious commercial producers.

Subsidies

USDA acreage reduction and price support programs bestow the biggest subsidies on the largest farmers. In 1970, the top 137,000 farmers, or less than 5 percent of all farmers, received 46 percent of the $3.7 billion in subsidy payments. A California cotton producer led with $4.4 million, eight other operations received $1 million or more, and 23 got $500,000 or more.

The prosperity of big farmers has also been financed by USDA research programs through their development of new crops, fertilizers, pest controls,

irrigation techniques, and labor-saving machinery suitable primarily for large-scale agriculture. Big operators have enjoyed a host of other government subsidies, many of them hidden. Large landowners, especially in the West, have reaped windfalls in land appreciation from federally-financed irrigation systems and a vast network of dams and canals built by the federal government. In many cases, the government has helped landowners make new lands fertile while at the same time paying them not to grow crops. The most significant hidden subsidy to big farms is a labor subsidy: exclusion of farm workers from the protections that apply to other workers, such as workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance, and collective bargaining, has kept their labor costs among the lowest in the nation.

Rich Farmers Benefit

This multiplicity of subsidies has hastened the penetration of the farm economy by ever-larger units and the growth of corporate farming. Twenty years ago the average farm size was 215 acres; today it is estimated to be 387 acres. The nation's 40,000 largest farms–less than one percent of all farms–accounted for at least one-third of all agricultural production. Farm prices in 1970 fell to 67 percent of parity, the lowest since the Depression, but many farms of this size still earned a 10 percent return on investment– the average in farming is 3 percent–comparable to the profits of major industrial corporations.

The Agriculture Act of 1970 leaves farm policy basically unchanged. The new legislation sets limits of $55,000 per crop on subsidies in wheat, feed grains, and cotton (sugar is not affected). But it still rests on a system of planned scarcity and a subsidization process that widens the gap between big and small operators. Already large cotton growers are resorting to a variety of legal maneuvers–such as splitting their holdings among family members so each can get a check–to keep on qualifying for maximum payments. Total expenditures for subsidy programs are expected to continue at the present rate.

Discrimination in Farm Programs

All small farmers have suffered from government policy, but black farmers have been the chief victims. In 1950, there were 560,000 black-operated farms; today there are only 98,000. In the same period, the total black farm population fell from 3,158,000 to 938,000; the average annual loss was 10.5 percent compared to 3.9 percent among whites.

USDA has been repeatedly found guilty of discriminating against blacks. The

worst rights offender among USDA-assisted programs is the Cooperative Extension Service (CES). A recent audit of the operation of the Alabama CES conducted by the Inspector General's Office of USDA found the situation unimproved since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Black county agents are assigned work on a racial basis, are subordinate to white agents, and often have heavier work loads in areas with large black populations. Deprived of adequate services, black farmers remain handicapped by outmoded techniques and low productivity.

Blacks are still virtually unrepresented on the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service's locally elected farmer committees which determine crop allotments and price support payments. There are only three black members among the 4,100 county-level committeemen in the South, less than one-tenth of one percent in a region where blacks are from 10 to 20 percent or more of the farm operators and where they comprise a majority in 58 counties.

The Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), USDA's credit agency for low-income rural people, has steadily improved black representation on its county committees and has noticeably increased black participation in its low-interest loan programs. Yet the help that it does provide black farmers is unequal to that given whites who are similarly impoverished. In 1969, the average size of operating loans received by black borrowers was $2,226, while loans to whites averaged $5,928. The average size of economic opportunity loans was $1,319 to blacks, $2,281 to whites.

Black Migration Persists

The migration of blacks out of the South continued during the last decade at nearly the same pace as in the 1940s and 1950s. The 1970 census estimates show a net migration from the 16 Southern states of 1.4 million blacks in the 1960s, as compared with 1.5 million in each of the previous decades. Migration—primarily to California and Northern urban states—was at an annual rate of 140,000. Earlier predictions that the movement out of the rural South had diminished assumed that black Southerners were finding more jobs in their own region as a result of economic growth and federal equal employment laws. The new data suggest that blacks have not been able to break through job barriers in significant numbers.

Hired Farm Workers

Agriculture is still one of the nation's largest employers. About 2.5 million persons did some hired farm work in 1970, a decrease of 4 percent from the

2.6 million in 1969. Of these, about 1.1 million were casual laborers, who worked less than 25 days, and 1.4 million were noncasual workers. The number of migrant workers ranged from the government's low estimate of 196,000 to half a million estimated by the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. (Migrants are not counted in any official census.)

For an average of 80 days of farm work, hired farm workers earned $887 in cash wages. The 1.4 million noncasual workers (those working 25 days or more) averaged 137 days and earned $1,519 from all sources. Domestic migratory workers averaged 123 days and earned $1,697. Nearly 1.5 million persons did farm work only, averaging 102 days and earning $1,083. Approximately 555,000 farm workers are now covered by the $1.30 minimum wage. The annual composite hourly farm worker's wage rose to $1.42 in 1970 from $1.33 in 1969, yet was only 42 percent of the average factory worker's wage. Despite the establishment of a federal minimum wage for farm workers, their relative wage position has not improved appreciably during the last twenty years.

Accidents

Farm work remains one of the most hazardous occupations. Agriculture ranked third, behind only mining and construction, in work-related deaths in 1970. Even with the phasing out of DDT, chemical pesticides are still a major danger to farm workers and their families. In California alone, one in every six farm workers annually suffers injuries due to pesticides. Parathion, a nerve gas derivative, and other organo-phosphates endanger the health of workers in and around Florida's citrus groves.

Farm Labor Organizing

In July 1970, when the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) signed contracts with most of California's table grape growers, the event climaxed nearly a century of efforts to organize the people who harvest the nation's crops. Farm workers were either too poor to strike or too itinerant to organize. And when they protested, vigilantes, often joined by the law, beat them down. A combination of factors made the UFWOC breakthrough possible: skillful organization and leadership, the ability to link economic demands with the broader movement for dignity and social justice, and wide support of the two-year grape boycott by labor, church, civic, and civil rights organizations. The contracts, which cover about 10,000 vineyard workers, call for an hourly wage of $1.80 in 1970 and increases to $1.95 in 1971 and $2.05 in 1972. In addition, they provide for incentive payments of 20 cents for each box of grapes picked, grower contributions of 10 cents an hour to the union's

health and welfare plan, and 2 cents for each box to the economic development fund (used chiefly to build housing for retired field workers). Jobs are assigned through the union hiring hall, thus eliminating the need for labor contractors and crew leaders. The contracts also set up joint worker-grower committees to regulate the use of dangerous pesticides and guarantee that delivered produce will contain no more than tolerance levels of pesticides.

Even as the grape contracts were being signed, UFWOC was getting involved in another major battle. In August, 7,000 workers walked off the Salinas Valley lettuce fields after growers refused to hold secret union elections and signed backdoor agreements with the Teamsters Union. Following a court injunction against all strike activity in the Salinas area, UFWOC leader Cesar Chavez announced a nationwide boycott of non-union lettuce grown in California and Arizona. By the end of the year, four large lettuce companies–Inter Harvest (United Fruit), Fresh Pict (Purex), Pic 'n Pac (S.S. Pierce Co.), and D'Arrigo Bros.–had rescinded their contracts with the Teamsters and signed with UFWOC.

While farm workers in California are making significant progress, the great majority of farm workers are still unorganized. UFWOC's organizing successes in the West will need to be duplicated in states like Texas and Florida before farm unionism wields the bargaining power necessary to inaugurate a truly new era in American agriculture.

Child Labor

A substantial segment of agriculture still depends on child labor: one-fourth of farm wage workers, or as many as 800,000, are under 16–some as young as 6 years of age. In Aroostook County, Maine, 35 percent of the potato acreage was harvested largely by children. In the Willamette Valley of Oregon, 75 percent of the strawberry and bean harvesters were children. An investigation by the American Friends Service Committee of child labor abuse found conditions reminiscent of sweatshops of the 1930s, with children stooping and crawling through fields sprayed with DDT in 100-degree heat for 10 hours a day to harvest crops.

Most children of farm worker families suffer serious educational disadvantages. The impact of the federal education program for migrant children, according to a study by the National Committee on the Education of Migrant Children, has "not dented indifference to and neglect of migrants on the part of cities and states." While children went hungry and untreated medically, $17 million of budgeted federal funds were turned back unused by the states.

Migrants and Federal Programs

Poor health, squalid housing, and powerlessness continue to be the lot of migrant workers. Federal programs designed to help lack adequate funding and are administered by state and local bodies often unresponsive to migrant needs.

The migrant's life expectancy of 49, twenty years less than the average, reflects the gap between the medical care he gets and that received by most Americans. While the average person now pays about $300 per year for health services, only $15 is expended for each migrant under the government's Migrant Health Program. Bad and unsanitary housing adds to the misery of migrants. Since 1962 the Migrant Housing Program has produced 7,300 units which meet only 2 percent of the total need, and has used only 30 percent of the funds available.

Major federal programs to aid poor people also serve migrants poorly, if at all. A 1969 study of food assistance programs showed only 16 percent of the migrants in Texas participating, less than 2 percent in Michigan, and less than .001 percent in Wisconsin. The Farm Labor Service, originally created to help farm workers get the best jobs available, often assists in their exploitation. A suit brought by California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) charges that the Farm Labor Service offices in that state serve to depress wages and working conditions, primarily through the device of referring a surplus of workers to growers who violate minimum wage and health laws. CRLA, one of the few federally funded efforts that have advanced the interests of farm workers, was in grave danger in 1970 as the big growers and Governor Ronald Reagan of California pressured a wavering Administration in Washington to cancel the program.

Legislation and Government Hearings

Congress voted to extend unemployment compensation coverage to an additional 4.8 million workers, but refused once again to include farm workers. Meanwhile, big grower spokesmen continued to oppose meaningful coverage of farm workers under the National Labor Relations Act. While the AFL-CIO continues to press for their inclusion, UFWOC believes such coverage would weaken its power because the present NLRA outlaws secondary boycotts. The operations that employ most of the workers in agriculture are too big and diversified to be brought under effective economic pressure by the strike tactics allowed by the NLRA. Instead, UFWOC favors a return to the original Wagner Act which set up the NLRA in 1935 and under which organized labor gained most of its current strength.

Senator Edward Kennedy introduced a bill to curb continuing and widespread employment of illegal entrants, mostly from Mexico, by making farmers who

hire them subject to prosecution. Alien workers, willing to accept lower rates of pay than residents, still constitute a serious problem: in the twelve months ending June 30, 1970, over 58,000 aliens working in agriculture were deported. Because of a lack of public interest, hearings on this bill have not been held. Hearings held by Senator Walter Mondale's Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, following the nationwide showing of NBC-TV's "Migrant," represented an important attempt to make giant corporations in agriculture accountable for their treatment of farm workers. Exposure of substandard working and living conditions in its Florida citrus groves forced the Coca-Cola Company to announce a program of improvements.

Senator George McGovern's Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs held a series of hearings that underscored the shocking housing conditions in rural areas. One improvement came in the 1970 Housing Act, which provides for an increase in the maximum grant for construction of farm labor housing from 66 2/3 percent to 90 percent.

Poverty Census Rises

For the first time since 1959, the number of Americans living in poverty increased. In 1970 the poverty census climbed to 25.5 million, up 1.2 million from 1969, according to federal figures. Conditions for the rural poor are getting worse–especially for the blacks who, as a group, are falling farther behind whites. Not only are more black people poor–one black in three compared to one white in ten–but they now represent 31.5 percent of the poor compared to 27.9 percent in 1959. They are also poorer, on the average, than their white counterparts: the typical poor black family's income was $1,300 below the poverty line; the average poor white's was $1,000 below.

Hunger: Half a Bowl Is Not Good Enough

A government that spends billions to rid itself of the effects of abundance was still unwilling "to put an end to hunger in America," as President Nixon had promised in 1969. Even with the unprecedented expansion of food stamp rolls from 3.6 million to 9.5 million persons during the year, fewer than one hungry person in three got stamps. All federal food programs reached less than half of the nation's poor. The increase in food assistance appropriations from $1.2 billion in fiscal year 1970 to $2.8 billion for 1971 fell far short of the estimated $8 billion that it would take to overcome hunger and malnutrition. Besides inadequate financing, restrictive features in guidelines and obstruction at the local level combine to cheat the poor of their rightful benefits.

Congress voted $1.5 billion for the food stamp program for fiscal year 1971, more than twice the previous appropriation; at the same time, a "must-work" provision was added that may force thousands off the rolls. The new law also sets a $110 monthly stamp ceiling for a family of four—only 30 cents a meal per person—which may reduce allotments for many more. Practically every county in the nation has a food assistance program, but "paper program" counties persist where local officials' hostility and lack of outreach confine participation to a small portion of the eligible poor. Local indifference is acute in many areas where 3.7 million of the poor still depend on commodity distribution.

The National School Lunch Act now provides for mandatory free and reduced-price lunches for children from families at or below the poverty level, but only 5 million of the more than 9 million needy children were receiving such meals by the end of 1970. Many local school officials illegally deny benefits to poor children or subject them to flagrant discrimination.

Housing Promises Betrayed

More than twenty years after Congress pledged "a decent home for every American family" at least 8 million homes—two-thirds of them rural households—are substandard. Usually the homes of the rural poor lack central heating; few contain all plumbing facilities; many are so dilapidated that they compare with the most squalid dwellings in economically underdeveloped lands. A survey by the Tufts-Delta Health Center of the homes of residents in Bolivar County, Mississippi, shows that only three of every ten units have piped water, only one in four a bathtub or shower, while seven of ten have "sunshine" privies—no pit, no permanent siding, no rear wall. In winter, some families are forced to cannibalize their own homes—to tear boards from the walls for firewood.

Yet only about 10 percent of all federal housing funds goes to rural areas, and most of that fails to reach the poor. In fiscal year 1970, the Farmers Home Administration made housing loans and grants totaling $791.5 million, up 55 percent from the preceding year. Half went to families with incomes of $10,000 or more; only 5 percent went to families earning $3,500 or less. FmHA's standards exclude families whose mortgage payments would be much less than the rent they now pay for their shacks as well as those families who could afford to build structurally sound, low-cost houses with basic but minimum water and sanitation facilities.

An estimated 13.5 million new and rehabilitated housing units are needed in the next ten years in rural America. Of these, 7 million or 700,000 a year must be subsidized. At the current rate of 120,000 units a year—one-sixth of the

necessary pace—it will take more than fifty years to meet the rural housing famine.

Welfare: Reform or Regulation?

Welfare rolls rose more sharply than ever in 1970, to a total of 12.5 million people—or six percent of all Americans. Feeding the relief explosion is a steady flow of millions forced to migrate from the countryside to the cities.

Benefits, though increased during the 1960s, are still meager and are lowest in those states where rural deprivation is most prevalent. In Mississippi, for example, families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) are expected to survive on $564 a year, and in Louisiana on $1,000 a year. The national average is $2,160. Many of those eligible are arbitrarily excluded from coverage by local welfare boards. A USDA survey of rural poverty in the Mississippi Delta found only 11 percent of the poor families on public assistance.

The Administration's Family Assistance Plan (FAP) would eliminate local discretionary authority and reduce inequities by guaranteeing a minimum national allowance of $1,600 for a family of four, plus $700 in food stamps. At the same time, the FAP would subject the poor to another form of regulation by establishing an elaborate system of penalties and incentives to force recipients to work. With jobs so scarce, this requirement would promote severe economic exploitation of the poor and depress existing wage standards. As an alternative, the National Welfare Rights Organization called for a minimum annual income of $5,500, based on a government estimate of the amount needed to maintain a low-cost living standard in 1970. The FAP was shelved by Congress at the end of the year but is expected to be revived.

Towards a Program for Rural Reconstruction

Pervasive signs of environmental decay have fractured the myth that mechanized mass production methods best serve the nation's food and fiber needs. Unless alternatives are found, the destruction of resources, disruption of communities, and waste of human lives will continue unabated.

During the last decade, a grassroots movement has emerged among poor people in the rural South that offers them a chance for a new start in their own communities. Thousands have joined together in more than 100 farming, consumer, handicraft, and small industrial cooperatives in order to help themselves. These enterprises provide an alternative to migration or starvation; strengthen participation by the poor in local politics by alleviating economic

dependency; and offer a model of rural reconstruction. Their duplication on a national scale could lead to the decentralization of cities into smaller and more balanced communities sharing the best features of both rural and urban life. To survive and grow, these efforts will need a comprehensive program of aid including development capital, education and job training, health care, and housing. And this means a new government policy in agriculture that puts people ahead of profits and the quality of life ahead of the continuing proliferation of commodities. It also means widespread support by urban as well as rural citizens, whose interests are truly linked.

The National Sharecroppers Fund began comprehensive rural development programs in two key areas in 1970. With financial and technical assistance from NSF, farmer cooperatives in both Halifax County, Virginia, and Burke County, Georgia, are shifting from tobacco and cotton crops to high-yield, labor-intensive vegetable cultivation and experimenting with organic methods. Farm families who otherwise would have been uprooted are also planning new housing, health and child care facilities and other self-help projects. In addition to its field programs, NSF works to make government more responsive to the needs of the rural poor; supports the efforts of farm workers to organize and secure the right to bargain collectively; and carries on an extensive educational program to inform the public of the facts of rural poverty and the measures necessary to end it.

Note: *See page 12 for additional information about the National Sharecroppers Fund.*

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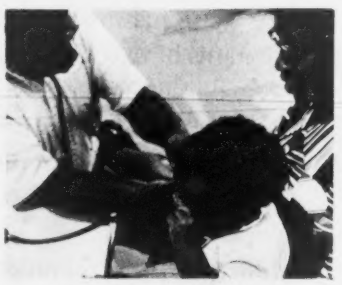

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